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BIRTH CONTROL AS A SOCIO-ECONOMIC
PANACEA.

NAHUM WOLF GOLDSTEIN.

WHATEVER one may think of Malthus' theories of the disproportion between the increase of population and the increase of food, of the eternal struggle between man and mother earth, one may find for them a certain justification.

A hundred and twenty years ago Europe was just beginning to emerge from the protracted and horribly dark night of feudalism. Intensive agriculture was practically unknown. The great scientific discoveries as to soils, manures and plant constituents, which have poured new life into agriculture, were yet to come. The science of chemistry was still in its elementary stages, and the genius of technical invention, which has charmed into being gigantic forces of production and transportation, had not spoken its mighty word as yet. On the other hand, the new transatlantic world with its inexhaustible wealth of grain and wheat was nothing but a revealed promise, a mighty dream of the future, which few could decipher in all its magnitude.

The creative power of European society appeared insignificant and circumscribed. Out of a boundless wealth of natural soil, out of our unlimited kingdom of matter, the as yet uncultivated and relatively impotent human effort could but mould and shape into being a limited amount of products. And economists like Malthus, compelled to shrink their vision and cut their socio-economic observations short at the boundaries of their own economic epoch, could not but see a conflict between the rapidly striding reproduction of the human species and the slowly moving reproduction of matter. What was in reality a temporary and conceivable dissonance between unlimited matter and limited application of human pro-

ductivity, Malthus construed into the eternal conflict between unlimited population and limited matter. Or, to be more precise, the disparity between two phases of evolution inside of the social organism, Malthus had assumed to be a disparity between the social organism and nature.

So much justification for Malthus. So much vindication for his theoretical delusion, born in a melancholy world of incapacity and limitation, and borne on the crest of a profound social pessimism.

But what of our Neo-Malthusians, who have the mighty stretch of a century of marvelous development to look at? How in the face of this development can they call us back to the antiquated, out-of-wind-and-air-created philosophy of Malthus.

The vital fallacy of Malthus and the Neo-Malthusians lies in their conception of overpopulation and poverty as a result of natural forces. To them there are two forces running counter in nature—the force of population and the force of produce. The first is whirling wildly, madly, bent upon one aim—the attainment of the greatest possible quantity. The second is of a more sparing and reserved character. The increase of food always lagging behind the increase of population, a state of affairs results, where the food to be distributed in society becomes inadequate for its maintenance, where an overpopulation appears on the scene, and poverty and disease smite humanity. Poverty is thus derived from a friction of purely natural forces: the nature of man and the nature of soil. And since it is called forth and fostered by natural phenomena, it must of necessity partake of the same qualities; it must be regarded as a natural law itself, as part and parcel of an organic system.

Thus Malthus and his modern disciples are led by the iron hand of their own logic to that point, where poverty in greater or lesser degree is perpetuated and made to cast its eternal shadow in the endless path of man. Since poverty is reduced to a natural law, it follows that it can-

not be eradicated and stricken from the fabric of existence; that it can only undergo certain evolutionary changes and reforms. And the best way to smooth the path for this evolution, is to intermeddle with the generative processes of humanity, to introduce order and consciousness into the chaotic and blindly-proceeding multiplication of society!

In so far Malthus of the eighteenth century and the birth-controlists of the twentieth century stand on one and the same sociological ground. Their theoretical conception of overpopulation and poverty, the practical solution of these problems they arrive at, bear the strictest relation. They only dissent as to the methods to be employed. The ascetic and reserved Englishman dreams of a world transformed into a monstrous ice-house, of a world dissolved into millions of little monasteries, where "moral restraint" is practiced, and where there is no mellow yielding to the charms of love and passion. In contradistinction to this, the modern birth-controlists, unsubmissive to Jesuitic morality, preach full indulgence in passion—only passion shorn of its innermost vision, blank and dead as to its relation to eternity and immortality—passion reduced to a mathematical formula.

II.

Modern political economy has time and again shattered to pieces these Malthusian theories of population. It has, to paraphrase the great economist Marx, proved Malthus' philosophy of poverty to be nothing more nor less than the poverty of his philosophy. Irrefutably and infallibly it has established the fact, that overpopulation and poverty spring, not from biological sources, but solely and exclusively from sources social and economic.

In ancient society, where man was incessantly wrangling with nature for the elementary means of his subsistence, where the results achieved by his labor never equalled the amount of labor spent, overpopulation and poverty came as a direct consequence of underproduction. The scarcity

of products yielded by nature to society spelled superfluity of population, bore sole responsibility for its poverty.

Retracing mentally the steps of his slow social advancement, searching in the winding path of his misery and sorrow, the ancient man came bluntly and abruptly upon nature as the primary source of all his troubles. Spiteful and controversial, unwilling to unlock her hidden riches, she seemed to the ancient man to signify an enormously oppressing force of evil and hamper. And we find that he struck back to whence his blows came. To counterbalance the parsimonious tendency of nature to withhold her products he vowed to withhold and stint in the generation and upbringing of new life! An eye for an eye! A tooth for a tooth!

Centuries have since gone into oblivion. The unabated search of man for the key to mother earth has ultimately been crowned with success. He found it. He opened up vast and gigantic new lands. He bent to his will and subjected to cultivation what seemed to be eternally barren and sterile deserts. He invented an immense and complicated mass of tools of production—and to-day it is no more a question of underproduction that confronts individual and society, but largely one of diametrically opposite character, that of overproduction. It is a well known truism that the intensity of human labor developed through its adaptation to the speed of the machine, coupled with the enormous development of technique, tend toward the greatest productiveness possible. As a result, present day society at any given moment finds itself in the possession of infinitely more products than are actually indispensable for its maintenance. With the augmentation of this chronic overproduction, with the ever increasing incursion of the machine into the domain of industry and agriculture, there goes an ever decreasing demand for hands. Men are driven to vacate their jobs and leave humbly for the ranks of the gloomiest and most vanquished army on earth—the army of the unemployed. Or they slide and fall into that terrible pit from which there is no return: they find

virtual death in the alleys of shameful and crumb-begging pauperism.

We are thus able to draw a demarcation between ancient and present society. In antiquity overpopulation and poverty emanated from underproduction, and individual poverty was conditioned mainly upon poverty of society. In our modern social organization overpopulation is largely due to overproduction, and individual poverty is nothing but a legitimate child of social wealth. The inference to be drawn therefrom is that whereas in antiquity the reduction of population in the form of infanticide and abortion could be regarded as a justifiable answer to overpopulation and poverty, in our present order of superabundance and wealth the answer to the social question lies exclusively in the economic sphere, in the just rearrangement of socio-economic relations.

III.

Is there any *raison d'être*, then, for the apprehension birth-controlists and Neo-Malthusians are instilling into the slums and ghettos as to the economic fallacies of uncurbed propagation? Can the economic question come within any decent approach of solution if birth control by chance assumes mass proportions?

There can be no question that in single isolated cases the adoption of the small family system may lead to a higher economic plane. But let the working class as a whole be permeated by birth-control ideas, and society will spring its surprise upon them; wages will soon go down and adapt themselves to the lessened needs of lessened families. Numerical retarding of society, or what is equal to it, depopulation may effect certain changes in a given social organism, but must of necessity remain feeble and impotent in its application to poverty- as an organic whole, as a gigantic evil, whose roots penetrate so deeply into the soil of history. Inasmuch as the birth control movement does not strive actively to readjust economics to population, inasmuch as its basic aim is to passively readjust the pro-

cesses of population to the processes of economics, it barely touches upon the edge of poverty and it neither destructs nor constructs any tangible economic values whatever. Moreover, by lulling the masses into dreams of reforms to be swept into their midst through passive means, the birth-control movement indirectly preaches political abstinence, and thus reacts to the detriment of real social advancement. It may be well remembered what glowing enthusiasm the appearance of Malthus' "Essay on Population" called forth on the part of the British aristocracy. By shifting the burden of responsibility for their misery to the masses themselves, by ascribing all the social evils to their unascetic and inferior habits of exaggerated prolificness, Malthus came to be recognized as the champion of the unassailable privileges of the "ruling minority." Perpetual poverty, misery as a law of nature, famine and war as the divine predestination of the Creator—what else was there left to be desired by British reaction? What else could restore the pose of the dominating British classes after the severe jolt Godwin had given them with his forceful teachings of social and economic equality?

History is now turning back on its heels. Our modern birth-controlists are preaching the same gospel. They likewise make it appear that the responsibility for all the social and economic maladjustments of to-day rests upon the shoulders of the masses, that the bearer of the cross is blamable for the cross itself!

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